

A barbershop births a church of drug users, ex-cons, and homeless folks

Others have given up on them, but not God.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue



Photo by Tim Mossholder on Unsplash

James Rainey, who goes by the name Rusty, has set up his barber shop in Durham, England, to be the ultimate man cave. Leather lounge chairs ring the place. Quentin Tarantino soundtracks loop on iTunes. Video games are free. Ads for Jack Daniels and Marvel comics line the walls. It's a frat house atmosphere without the beer. And it is a most unlikely place to find a church.

Rusty, named for his red hair, talks about his faith more openly than anyone I've met in England. Maybe that's why he has a tattoo across his throat the way folks in prison and gang members do. He says Romans 8, referring to Paul's chapter on

hope. He has the tattoo, he tells me, partly to hold himself accountable.

He is an unlikely Christian. He grew up in one of the local villages, mistreated by his mum and dad. He understands why some young people choose homelessness, sleeping outside to avoid addicted and abusive parents. He joined the Royal Marines to spite his father, and being away from town made him persona non grata in the village. Locals believe one should be born, live, and die in the village, and if you leave, it must be because you think you are too good for the place. The local pub falls quiet when he walks back in.

His passion was always break dancing, which he did competitively. Break dancing was how he met his first Christian friend. A mate invited him to a dance class at Newcastle University “because the girls were so hot.” The instructor mentioned that he was studying physics and that he was a serious Christian.

“Don’t those two conflict?” Rusty asked. No, the man said.

“I started to watch him,” Rusty told me. “And I remember what he said: ‘I’ve seen some things science can’t explain.’”

Rusty tried going to church but says he “couldn’t understand a word.” He still hung out with church guys, playing soccer and break dancing. Once his ankle rolled when a “a guy weighin’ 18 stone” fell on it. He needed surgery. A friend asked if he could pray for the ankle, and Rusty was back at work in two days without surgery. He lost only 99 pounds in wages. An envelope arrived from a family member containing exactly that amount. Once, coming home from a break dancing gig at 1 a.m., not eager to go to work at 6 a.m., Rusty told his church friend, “If your God is real, he’ll find a way to get some coffee in my hand.” A batch of folks from King’s Church in Durham appeared, offering coffee.

During a time of intense stress, his scientist-teacher friend gave him a pile of books to read. Rusty chose the Bible. He would draw a bath and read from Genesis and Romans. The water soothed him, the gospel of hope calmed him. He sought out baptism and soon was trying to help King’s Church reach people from his background, people he understood. He got married, had a child, and opened his barbershop. Bootstraps pulled up—not by his own efforts, he insists, but by God’s grace.

Rusty and his friend Dan Northover began to invite people to come to the barbershop on Monday nights. Dan, who had gotten involved in King's Church as a university student, was always interested in reaching people on the margins. "I preferred talking to homeless people." Now he's an accountant, working three days a week to support his ministry habit. "No one would ever choose me, a middle-class civil servant, to reach these guys." But God has strange ways of reaching those he loves most.

Rusty and Dan didn't call it church. At first they didn't talk about God or spring faith on anyone. They fed people—a lot. They asked them about their stories. People brought videos from the internet to watch and talk about. And then they followed the Alpha course, an eight-week video introduction to Christianity. The series was easy to understand. "It had a bad dad joke vibe to it," Rusty said, and for folks who had been hurt or abandoned by their own parents, that was not a bad thing.

The Alpha course ended, and those attending said, "See yous next week." Dan and Rusty said, "OK, sure." That kind of informal approach to gathering might drive an organization-minded person mad, Rusty said, but for this handful of homeless, ex-cons, on-again, off-again drug users, and otherwise marginalized people, it was church.

Rusty's own direct involvement lasted only a year. It was stressful; he had a business and baby and spouse to tend to. Dan is still leading the group, five years on.

When Rusty told Dan he felt guilty for leaving the group, Dan replied, "There are times and seasons." What Rusty helped launch, Dan continues leading. The group has the sexy title of Monday Night Group.

One early attender supercharged the group. She was once one of the most notorious offenders in Durham, with more than 100 convictions to her name, and had been banned from being with children in her own family. She met God while contemplating suicide in a prison cell. After coming to Monday Night Group, "she literally went 'round and banged on doors in the estate, telling people, 'Come along, this is the most amazing thing,'" Dan recalled. The group grew from 15 to 35, outgrowing the barbershop. After a failed stint at a Methodist church ("we freaked them out"), they found a home with the Salvation Army.

Dan speaks of the Monday Night Group as the greatest experience of church he could imagine. "I absolutely love it," he said. "I can't imagine going to church anywhere else."

These are folks who've been kicked out of other churches, banned from whole cities, done hard time. Not a few are still addicts and alcoholics and have been for decades. They love God and love one another. They still slip up and hate themselves for doing so. With their criminal convictions, many can't get proper work.

For those who do want to chart a new course, there is help: a charity called Handcrafted teaches skills like woodworking, cooking, and carpentry. Rusty points me to his barstools: "One of the men in there made those for me." He goes on: "That Christmas the man slipped on the ice, drunk, hit his head, and was found dead the next morning."

The vibe at the meeting I attended was friendly. "We're not exactly safe," Dan said, "but we are welcoming." There are hard rules: no drink or drugs or sex or bullying, so that the weak are not preyed upon.

The group also resists being preyed upon by other churches, whose members sometimes show up to offer music, a sermon, better doctrine, or less doctrine. The group resists what look to them like golden handcuffs. "Then we'd just be like every other church in the city." The MNG has built something precious, with buy-in from its members, so Dan shields them: "I can be incredibly stubborn."

The people in the Monday Night Group "have had lots of evangelists, but no discipleship," Rusty told me.

Dan agrees. "I learned early that our church is going to look more like Corinthians than Romans," he said. The focus is on everyday struggles, not lofty theology. The Monday Night Group is never going to feel pious, and moral failures will always have a life-or-death element to them. And they don't rely on sudden conversions. Their model is less St. Paul on the road to Damascus and more St. Paul in the desert for three years preparing for his ministry.

Dan describes Rusty as a man full of conviction, who could turn his life around, with God's help, and who is sometimes impatient with those who cannot. He says things like, "You're a Christian now. Stop it."

Things are not that simple for the Monday Night Group. Dan describes members of the MNG who vanish for months at a time—in prison or on a bender—and return penitent. This has been their pattern for decades. Everyone they love or who once loved them has given up on them. Not God. And so not this church.

The MNG meets in small groups gathered at scattered tables, which keeps anyone from monopolizing the microphone, whether homeless or seminary-trained. Trained volunteers from King's Church are at each table and encourage discussion. "It looks like chaos, but there is structure there," Dan tells me. And in the discussions, people voice insights about scripture that are not likely to arise elsewhere.

For example, in the story about Jesus meeting the woman at the well in John 4, Jesus tells the woman "everything I have ever done" in a way that is somehow good news for the woman. She goes back home to evangelize the people who'd long rejected her. That story rings a particular bell for the Monday Night Group.

"That's us," people at the tables say. When the woman marvels that Jesus knows everything she's ever done, the people at MNG think of what the townspeople would murmur about them: "Lady, everyone knows everything you've ever done." But unlike the townspeople, Jesus' knowledge of a person's past leads to mercy, not condemnation.

"These folks know they're sinners," Dan said. "They've been terribly hurt, they've hurt other people terribly. . . . These folks know they're not all right. And they've been in the media for not being all right. So everyone else in town knows it too."

Many churches are desperate to plant and develop new congregations. One barbershop in Durham, England, did so almost without trying. "God, send us the people no one else wants" is a renowned prayer among some preachers. It's a dangerous one, because God will do it. Just ask one red-headed barber from northeast England.

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